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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000447

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [OPRC](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [XF](#)
SUBJECT: US CONSULATE JEDDAH HOSTS DEBATE WATCHING EVENTS
AND HELPS INITIATE IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS

Classified By: ACTING CONSUL GENERAL CB TONEY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Consulate Jeddah has hosted two US Presidential debate-watching events to encourage participation and engagement within the Saudi Arabian community. Both events brought together professors, media, and members of Jeddawi civil society and spurred lively and nuanced conversations related to the US electoral process. The events also served to network Saudis working on similar issues and to raise discussion on important domestic matters. END SUMMARY.

Two Debate Screenings Demonstrate the Importance

of the Election to Saudis

12. (U) The consulate organized two events to watch the first and the third Presidential debates on the day following their live-airing in the US. The events took place at the Consulate General residence. More than a dozen Saudi participants including members of the media, university faculty, and businessmen with an interest in civil society joined Foreign Service Officers and local consulate staff to watch the debate and participate in a discussion.

13. (C) The interest among the participants in the debate and the electoral process was notably high with some of the individuals having already watched the debate live when it aired at 4 AM the same day. A great deal of discussion took place both during and after the screening of the debate with the participants showing nuance and thoughtful analysis in their commentary. There were also moments of laughter by the crowd, particularly at points during the third debate when the infamous "Joe the Plumber" had been referenced by either candidate.

14. (C) Several comments centered on the racial implications of the current election and the impact that an Obama presidency might have on changing the face of America. Most of the participants showed support for Obama and one expressed the idea that his victory might help to bring America back to the world and would be better for Middle Eastern countries. After the first debate, one local professor expressed his support for McCain believing that he has more foreign policy experience than Obama. After the third debate, there was commentary by some that McCain seemed angry and out of touch with reality. Another comment suggested that McCain seemed obsessed with becoming President. One participant, Maha Akeel, a managing editor at a local news outlet felt there is not a much point in the debate in the first place since most people are already decided regardless of the outcome.

¶15. (C) Local Jedawi architect, intellectual and civil society member, Sami Angawi, noted the importance of the election to the rest of the world. He suggested that there should be a system to allow the entire world to vote on the US Presidency in which every million votes would count for one vote in the actual race.

Thoughts on Meetings and US Engagement with

Civil Society

¶16. (C) Officers noticed that some of the attendees had not previously met and were exchanging business cards for the first time. This led to a discussion in which several of the attendees admitted the difficulty in meeting and the opportunity that the US consulate can make in creating a safe space for such gatherings to take place.

¶17. (C) A discussion emerged regarding the many high-ranking US individuals who had been taken to meet Sami Angawi. One individual commented that America frequently talks about issues, but does not follow through on suggestions. Angawi noted that he had met with many people from the US and nothing has changed. Adel Abdou of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal studies contrasted this with Saudi Arabia, where he claims the leadership makes incremental changes instead of just putting ideas in the air. Angawi spoke about his ideas of creating more people-to-people connections and his strong support for cultural exchanges. He said that he would be happy to keep talking about all his ideas, but that he really would like to see some action as a

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result. Abdou had a slightly different take, suggesting the US increase aid globally in order to restore its global footing. He suggests that, the "US take 10-20% of the money in destroying Afghanistan and Iraq and supporting Israel" to be used for assistance purposes.

¶18. (C) There was a debate between Sami Angawi and Abdullah Hamidaddin, a young intellectual involved with ethical and social reform, regarding whether change in Saudi Arabia should take place from the top down or at the grass roots level. While both individuals see a place for lower level change, Hamidaddin supports a mixture in which the state is still an active player in reform.

¶19. (C) There was a discussion of the recent inter-faith dialogue in Madrid and other similar initiatives. One well-respected participant, Hussein Shobokshi, commented that, "the interfaith dialogue is like blind-dating for religions." His comment reflected a belief that it is critical for a broader cross-cultural understanding to be the underpinning of any venture that seeks to bring together people of different faiths.

¶10. (C) COMMENT. The attendance and conversation at the debate watching events reflects a high-level of interest in this particular election by Saudi citizens and in particular the intellectuals. The fact that some important members of Jeddah's civil society have not previously met suggests the difficulty and infrequency of holding regular meetings. It also reinforces the need for the mission to support programming and arrange meetings and roundtables that allow for civil society members and practitioners to meet and share best practices. END COMMENT.
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